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Momentum| Poems

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MOMENTUM

poems by

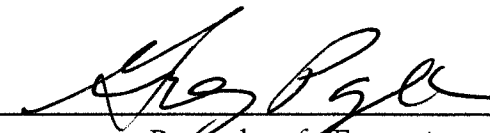
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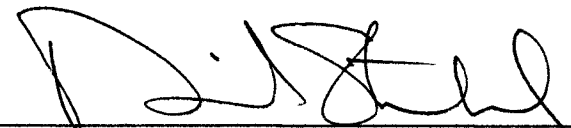
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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Monsoon Season, Tucson, AZ / | 1 |
| In Sleep (Ghosts) / | 3 |
| Inflorescence / | 5 |
| La Grave Poulet Du Soir Est Toujours Avec Moi / | 7 |
| Momentum / | 8 |
| Above the Manure Pile at Dusk / | 14 |
| Awake / | 15 |
| Road Trip, Silence / | 16 |
| Not Silence / | 17 |
| 2AM, After the Office Party / | 19 |
| Crossing Over / | 20 |
| Asthma / | 22 |
| To the Woman of My Dreams / | 24 |
| Obedience / | 26 |
| Flat Tire Blues / | 27 |
| Photo ID / | 28 |
| Fishing the Missouri / | 29 |
| Coming Home / | 31 |
| Walking the Clark Fork River / | 32 |
| Taking Inventory / | 33 |
| Cogs / | 35 |
| All the Silence Behind Him / | 36 |
| After the Drive-By / | 38 |

Daniel / 39

Ferris Wheel / 40

Fog / 42

In the Scrub Grass Between the Back Lot of a Movie Theater and the

Clark Fork River, a Ring-Neck Pheasant Looks For Food / 43

After Blue / 44

*Nature moves us inwardly in response to
every guise that fortune wears; it brings us
pleasure, fuels our wrath, crushes us to earth
beneath our sorrow, tortures us, and then,
with speech, brings out the motions of the soul.*

Horace, *Ars Poetica*

Monsoon Season, Tucson AZ.

A warm body
on my back, the heat
an unshakable habit
not even my own choosing.
I look to the sky and think, *Just make it*
to five o'clock when the thunderheads
will mimic the Mission's bell
as they crack open.

I sit in the sticky resin chair
on my back porch, listen while river toads
in a dry wash chant to the sky.
The guide for my sixth-grade field trip
had a voice like those toads
as he told us about ocotillo
and saguaro. From the top of a hill
he pointed a thick, sun-cracked finger
at each as he talked. I could only stare,
across the small valley, in awe
at the way the saguaro stood
motionless, like a question
asked in silence.

I'd be a saguaro
with down-turned arms, the ones
the local tribes say are touched
by evil. I cannot wait, I don't

have the patience faith requires.
I shake my fist at the sky, shake
until I can no longer
lift my arm, until it hangs
limp and useless. The first
fat drops of rain pock
the dirt and the toads
go silent. I look to the ground
for my answers.

In Sleep (Ghosts)

She catches moonlight
in her palm and cups it
to her face. In its glow

he can see the lines
edging her eyes and mouth
grow soft, blurry like the ink

where her tears fell
when she signed her name
under the last *I'm sorry*

still meant for him.
And to see in her now
that awkward girl

he followed through the halls
in high school, or the flatness
in her eyes while she breast-fed,

it's a fantasy, a movie shown only
on the backs of his eyelids. A movie
whose end he has slept through,

unaware, until he's woken
by the slap of film
against reel. He is left

with only the blank stare
of empty light and the rictus grin
of the long dead.

Inflorescence

Out here, I could say anything.
I could tell you about lightning
and a girl sitting at a window counting
one one-thousand, two one-thousand,
waiting for her answer.

Wasps dip and jive
over the water, and I envy them
the meniscus and the way it holds them.
Later, with swim fins
on my hands, I will kill them,
line the poolside with their corpses
and walk among them, reading
their twisted bodies like tea leaves.

I dreamt again I was the car
in front, the me that left
ten seconds sooner, the eyes that flipped
left and right and slid through
a yellow-turning-red—seeing
too late the young girl
stepping off the curb—plunging foot
too slow, the giving in of dead steel
between the theremin of our bodies.

I can tell I've said this
all wrong. Your eyes, red,

puffy as prodded sea anemone,
tell me the same old story. I want to say
I've been in love with you
since we met, but I don't.
Instead, I give you
another stiff, platonic hug,
convince you, again, that he
still loves you. But next time,
I won't care how wrong
I say it, or how you will sit up
a little straighter—that polite way
of pulling back. I won't care about anything
but what it feels like
to finally step out of this shadow.

La Grave Poulet Du Soir Est Toujours Avec Moi

This serious chicken, I hate
the way she stares at me
all night, all eye twitch
and quivering wattle.
She is with me always, follows me
down the sidewalk, pecks at my heel
when I fail—
in her estimation—to pay quick heed
to the flat green man shouting
walk, dammit, walk.
She saunters after me
into the Metro, under the turnstile—
she needs no token, being
well connected, for a chicken—
and always takes an aisle seat,
never scoots to let a body rest.
I lurch my way, sometimes swinging
from ring to ring, from Champs-Elysees
to the Sorbonne. The damn hen, she just
sings scat like Ella. One man
fingers a pencil-thin mustache—you know
how judgmental those cool,
thinky French can be—but she,
la grave poulet, is unflappable.

Momentum

I thought I saw you today, in a car, turning left.
For a single beat my heart thumped hard, a chill
rippled my scalp, and I wasn't here.

I was back with you, on the edge
of Fresno, in a field of frosted scrubgrass,

and under the full moon it glittered
hard and quiet as the 3am sky. I stomped

my feet for warmth, frightened a quail
into flight. You clutched my arm, your fingers

icy through my shirtsleeve, so I wrapped
your hands in mine, a prayer within a prayer,

and held them to my mouth, and warmed them
with my breath. I was mistaken.



She settles soft and soapy down
all the way down in fingertips, the rough
and silky contradicted whorls.
I trace my name again,
forgotten concave of flesh where spine

and waist conspire, parcel of skin I claim
as mine—this shallow pond of moonlight—
I kneel and drink my fill.



The rear-view mirror is on fire
with the last of the sun pulled thin—
gauze of orange and darkening violet—

and even smog seems useful.
East Herndon Avenue: the in-between
where the city loosens its grip, where almond trees,

Malaga grape vines, and empty pastures
swallow sound and offer nothing back. Out here
the radio has nothing worth saying,

though I leave it on, letting the static
ebb and pound like low tide.
Like your fingers and the soft drag

of your nails down my shoulder, over my forearm
and across my wrist. Like your hips
relaxing onto mine, your body light as a reflection,

and you looked down at me and said,
I love you, and on this night of firsts
even this seemed possible.

But tonight, on the edge of this town
that's forgotten its boundaries, there is
only the slow ache of my fingers

and a conflicted calf muscle
wanting acceleration into whatever rising
or falling comes next.



Cross-legged, on the floor, we hunched
over the pizza, and the rough funnel of boxes,
her life sealed tight and stacked
against the walls, in corners, pushed us
down and in to the empty center of this present
about to become her past. Our foreheads
touched once, both of us leaning in—

The mover's rough hands found us
curled into the carpet
and one another. I wish
I could say we made love
or promises we meant to keep,
but there was only what was left



Saguaro pepper the small valley, ancient,
giant lawndarts thoughtlessly thrown, never taken in.

Rhythmic buzz of a dijerido
in his head, or in his veins, he won't be able to tell which
or if there's a difference. Single rivulet of sweat
will slide behind his ear, down his neck.
It will be noon. August. Time to be done with it.
An ellipsis of wind will rise and he will lift the urn.
Ash will swirl, held together a moment
as a body will remember itself.
It will sink into the air, a cloud, become haze.
A shard of bone will bounce three times
and stop, caught in the resinous tangle of a creosote bush.
He will return the lid to the urn.
Pat the ash from his pant leg.
Get in his car and turn up the air.



Diamonds floating in the ether, they glitter... No,
that's been said before. Let me be plain:
it is a slip dress. Spaghetti straps. Sequins clavicle to toe.

To look at her is to see yourself in a thousand painfully
different angles, who you were, are, and will be
always shifting, until you are not even sure of your own name.

She extends a long-fingered hand and I catch a me
I think I know, a sliver of cause and effect, a fractal
of indecision grown immense in its constancy,

in its unrelenting and minute repetition. A life gone slack
at the edges. I am dumb until she shifts, strikes
a pouty contrapposto—pelvis tilted and arched back—

just a suggestion of thrust at the shoulders, a tiny tuck
of the chin and I awaken to a me I've never known:
I take her hand and bring a smooth, delicate knuckle

to my lips and my half-closed eyes tell her it is me she owns,
but again I am revised: a fading doorbell, no one home.



A train whistle. Echo. Filaments
weave through Hellgate Canyon, grow
thin and frightening.
Origin, unknown. Destination....

A man in Wellington
steps over the top, creaky porch step
and stops, rubs at a tickle in his ear.
He stops, key an inch from the lock. In their bed
his wife's back is cold. Hands in his pockets, he
turns, walks across the grass. Dew darkens shoes.
There are clouds. Where is the Southern Cross?

He is wading now through the heavy grass
lapping at his body his pants are soaked

heavy he leaves them behind a wave of beech trees
breaks over him undertow thick hand
around his leg his arm he kicks tears
his shirt away swims harder his eyes
break the surface where is the Southern Cross?

He floats now. Slow sway of current.

The clouds twist in place.

A lone kite twitches
on the horizon.

It dips, slices down
in the perfect arc
of a scythe with not
a scrap to harvest.

Above the Manure Pile at Dusk

the oily helix of blackbirds catch and release the dying light.

A tractor rusts stubbornly into the weeds.

Awake

The baseball, hide scuffed
and worn soft

by two generations
of fungo and curveballs in the dirt,

arcs from one outstretched hand
to another, moves through a late night,

reaches for early morning
with awkward grace.

The muffled slap of leather
on leather and a lone cricket.

The neighborhood long since
gone dark, but the olive tree strains

the glow of the back porch light
to speckled diffusion.

It is just enough
for two boys to play on.

Road Trip, Silence

We would just leave in the middle of the night, south down Highway 41 over the Kettleman Hills, the grass burned gold and still glowing like sunspots on the backs of our eyelids. At the Shell station outside Paso Robles we'd use the bathroom, buy thick, bitter coffee and resist the cashier's attempts at conversation. Even in winter, the windows go down as we'd merge onto 101. Over the Sierra Madre Mountains and down into San Luis Obispo and the air is heavy with salt. We'd turn onto Highway 1, follow the coastline to Cayucos and the empty beach, and sit a moment, let the vibration of the drive fall away. Far enough now from the highway, the only sound the push and pull of the waves. We'd find the same outcrop of rocks and sit, staring at a horizon only visible in our minds.

Not Silence

Part puppet part, stuffed animal,
with hard plastic eyes and teeth

of white felt, crookedly sewn on, Freddy
was a beaver I held long conversations with.

My mother would kneel beside my bed,
Freddy hovering above me

at the end of her arm, shyly
moving his head and front paws as he asked

about my day. I don't remember
the answers, or even the voice my mother used.

There was quiet, a stillness dropping like mist.
No TV, no radio. No arguments about which

bills to pay and which would wait
another month. The day

was done, and what wasn't done was left for the next.
I still wonder if my father noticed, if he winced,

fearing discovery, when the ice clinked in his drink
as he shifted his weight, or if he could hear the house

settle and creak over the amplified thud of his heart.

And I wonder if he ever thought to leave his post

outside my door, under the hall light I still needed left on to sleep,

where only his shadow could be seen.

2 AM, After the Office Party

They stand in her driveway and whisper
most of what comes into their heads.
He doesn't say

he loves her. She doesn't need to tell him
she doesn't. The fog hangs like gauze
from the rooftops, hovers over them

like the blankets they used to drape
between the chairs and the sofa, a fort
they built in her parent's living room,

where they'd sit in daytime darkness,
where she let him kiss her
that first and last time, where she

let him hold her shaking hands
when her father came home
drunk and loud. Where they'd listen

to her mother's sobs echo off linoleum,
or the slam of front
and then car door, everything

muffled and distant. She loved him then
as much as she knew how,
and let him hold her

until the silence returned.

Crossing Over

The street, almost deserted, dusted
with snow like a thought
just out of reach. I cross.
Snow blows past my feet
in the light, flowing S's
of a sidewinder, the one we woke
from its post-feed nap. A Sonoran
Sidewinder, horned rattlesnake—the jangle
of our packs and thumping,
almost-empty slosh of canteens
would've woken the dead,
you'd say later. Lucky for us,
you said, and gently
inserted the tip of your knife
behind the snake's jaw,
drew it quickly, stopping just
above the black-tipped rattle.
The head moved at loose angles,
scaly horns behind the eyes
scraped the rock like wet sandpaper.
You worked quicker now in the quivering beam
of my flashlight. You nudged a matted,
furry ball out of the belly.
It rolled to the ground.
Dirt caked its wet sides.
His Last Supper, you said. Kangaroo Rat.
Don't touch it, you said quickly,

it might have fleas. The plague.

I hadn't moved.

Back on the trail, you pointed again
to the wavy S's in the sand. Your flashlight
cast the troughs in shadow and the curves
were lost. I carefully erased them with my boot.

Asthma

I.

Today, a child's eyes rolled
and darted like a horse about to bolt.
But she wasn't going

anywhere, she just wanted
to breathe. Her father held her
and whispered in her ear.

Her mother scrambled
in an over-stuffed purse for the inhaler.
The child's body was as calm

as a goldfish lazily circling a small bowl.
Maybe it wasn't calm, but acceptance,
as though this need for chemicals was normal.

II.

When his father slammed the door
that last time, and his new home
was a third-floor walk-up

with brown stains
on the carpet, with thin walls
spotted with patch jobs the size of fists,

with a couple next door that fought

as loud as they fucked, he couldn't be still.
When the kids at school said it wasn't

his new step-mom's cooking
that kept his father
home at night, when they offered

to teach his mother
how to really cook,
he couldn't be calm.

He learned to spit
with eye-ball accuracy,
learned to make a fist, to give

and take a punch, to aim
for the throat
and the solar plexus.

He learned to make them feel
how it felt
to fight for breath.

To the Woman of My Dreams

I wouldn't have thought
you were my type, but
hey, I fancy myself flexible
and open-minded. I must say
the way you stare
over the top of your book,
like there is a figure
in the distance—it could be
your sister, an old lover, or
maybe Pushkin, it's hard to tell—
and they are waving and you
can't decide if you should wave back,
well, it's hypnotic, it's like balancing
on the ledge, knowing I shouldn't
look down but it's impossible
not to and—even as my inner
ear goes all aswirl and my stomach
tilts on its axis—I knew
I had to and, actually,
I think I like the feeling.
But anyway, what I'm trying to say
is, I think you're beautiful, the way
you put on your gloves is pure
ballet, and when you pull your hair
out from under your coat,
the gentle arc of your neck
would make Nefertiti herself sigh with envy.

And your walk—part strut, part sway,
with a dollop of stomp—belongs
on the cat-walk, or maybe
the construction site, tool belt akimbo,
hammer thumping your thigh.
And your lips, even
snarl-twisted, and the quick,
firm way you raise your arm
to flip me off as you walk out the door,
well, it warms my heart.

Obedience

My best friend, my sister, her friend, sat silent
around the Monopoly board, pieces frozen.
It was my turn. It had to wait.

My father wanted a reckoning,
one I had hoped
to keep private.

I don't remember
what I said, but I know
it was the way I said it,

and the look it had taken
13 years to perfect. His hand
reached out. My head snapped right

and back, a well-rehearsed
and involuntary response. The glow
of his fingers on my cheek

made the fire in my eye
flicker under his authority.
I sat down, grabbed the cold

lead boot, counted off the black eyes
of the dice, moved
a few steps closer to Go.

Flat Tire Blues

A toilet lying in a ditch
alongside Belmont Avenue,
halfway to Sanger and the best
huevos rancheros around.

I think I'll die if I don't
taste those spicy eggs.
I think I'll die if I don't
taste that spicy señorita.

Spare's bald but fine, but I
ain't got no jack, ain't gonna get
jack squat, and the squirrel
mounting his mate on the toilet,
he doesn't care a bit about
spicy egg on my face.
He doesn't care one bit about
a pissed señorita in my face.

95 degrees already
and only 9am.
Shirt's soaked through,
the road sticking to my shoes,
but I'd rather die than miss
a bite of those huevos rancheros.
I'd rather die than miss
the bite of my spicy señorita.

Photo ID

The cop directs traffic,
pushes the air, moves
us along, even if
it's at a crawl.
Out the back window
of his parent's van
Cory and I get a good,
long look at the small car,
now sideways on the road:
a half-crumpled napkin
tossed out a window.
It must have rolled
several times—the spread
of empty beer cans and shattered glass
lies on the road
like some art gallery
snowflake—the driver's head
rests limp and heavy, halfway
out a window
that isn't there anymore,
face down, like he's asleep
or maybe just tired,
and he doesn't have
the strength to lift it
one more time.
The coroner's assistant
grabs him by the hair
and lifts it for the camera.

Fishing the Missouri

The man next to me
looked too much

like my father,
eyes set deep

and his male-pattern baldness—
isthmus of stubborn hair

an accusing finger—
and when the pole

bent double,
his words,

my father's voice
and inflection,

they fell into the quivering
brown like ash

from his cigarette,
no satisfying *plop*,

no ripple to mark their passing;
I pulled and cranked,

fought that Rainbow
 right to the surface,

snapped the twelve-pound line,
 knocked my shoulder hard

against the boat's far side,
 spilled my uncle's Pabst

and sat there feeling
 the sludge of thin mud and beer

soak the seat of my pants,
 the rod still in my hands,

pointing up
 between my knees.

Coming Home

He stands outside the pale
rhombus of light outlined
in grass. He is unwelcome
here, on his father's lawn.
In silence, he watches his father
lift a dripping spoonful
to his lips, and another, without
pause or grace. Alone,
just thin soup and bologna
on dry, stale wheat. No one
to ask about his day, or care
that Jake still limps, his hips
and knees slowly shredding
the ligaments to thread.
Some day, heavy with heat,
halfway across the porch,
he'll collapse, his haunches
sagging behind him, dragging
him down. No one will notice.

Walking the Clark Fork River

Light blooms from a ballpark across the river.
The hollow tink of aluminum and a single,
high wail of a proud mother are almost lost

in the current. I can see,
through a break in the dogwood, young boys
in dusty jeans and faded polyester jerseys.

The first time, I was four. My father under-handed the ball
into the awkward trap of stiff leather
I couldn't yet squeeze shut.

We played

until the ball was fuzzy. We played for years,
until the seams whirled between us.

With every toss he'd raise his glove and push,
so I'd step back and throw harder, no arc,
every slap louder. I couldn't see

the grimace as he caught another in the palm.
The ball fell soft onto the grass at our feet.

Taking Inventory

We are weaving the welted foothills of Sabino Canyon, driving hard
into the memory of our future. Our shadows this night are old.
From the back seat they conspire and fold into one another.
The glowing sprawl of Tucson is behind and below us, streetlights
wilting like cemetery flowers. I can think of nothing worth saying.



There is an orange
shriveling into itself
on the kitchen counter,
a pair of scuffed boots
filling with silence.
A watch beginning
to tarnish.



The forgotten side-streets of downtown Fresno: avoiding
lunch-hour traffic, dust is our legacy. I am outside my body, fascinated
by my ability to speak with perfect, barbed clarity,
my words landing blow after blow, each time finding the fleshy
pink underbelly. I am yelling at my father
for the first time, fascinated that I have never hated, nor pitied, nor loved that
man
as much as I do at this precise, swirling moment.



Wasps own the garage.
They walk along the edges
of boxes stacked
to rafter height. They leave
no trace, no marks
in the pillowy dust.
In the corner, a raw-pine
toy chest keeps a secret.
Four rusting Tonkas, a rotten
leather marble pouch—long since
emptied—and a drawing on
yellowed paper: a crayon man
and boy standing on burnt
umber grass next to a tree,
round with sienna leaves.
Both are smiling, frozen and flat.

Cogs

The baby-blue dryer fills the room
with its crackling heat and thick
smell of clean towels and t-shirts.
The cogs of a household live
in that room, unsightly
and essential: washer, dryer, fifty-pound bag
of stale dog food, the extra freezer—
impassive as it syncopates with the bare,
soft-white bulb tracing lazy ovals
from the end of its leash—
and a mother. She digs,
finds mates for lonely socks.
Tenuous stack of a child's whites leans
into the steadfast pile of her own clothes.

All the Silence Behind Him

His fly is dead. It wasn't a pet, more
like a roommate, a sharer of space.
He doesn't know the when or where
of how it came to be,
but its life, as he knew it, existed
in the few inches between his window and the blinds.
It's dead now, lying on the sill. He didn't kill it,

didn't even try. The small thumps
as it bounced off the window,
the furious pitch of wings
rising until, exhausted,
it would pause. These noises
kept him company and he admired
the persistence. He felt
they understood each another.

In the same way it invaded his home—
an opportune dash
through a closing door,
or through the maze
of ductwork, he'll never know—
it became a companion.
He wonders, did it have a family?
Do they grieve for the absence?
Is he alone
in hearing the insistent knock

of this new silence?



Huddled against the wall outside his building
in a dirty, unlined sportcoat, an old woman
he never spoke to, never dropped
any of his guilt into her paper cup. He did
his best not to notice, or let his eyes
linger on her one drooping eyelid, or wonder
at the shocking whiteness
of her hands.

Did she ever fall in love
and stay up nights, stomach
burning with the acid of rejection? Did she fall
out of touch with her family, then live
with the regret of it, the shame
that kept her from going back,
going home? When he walked by
two weeks ago, and she
wasn't there, he felt a hole
in his surroundings. Felt, for a moment,
as if he were blind and woke
to find a lamp had been stolen
from his living room.

After the Drive-By

Alesha still walks
 this way
 every day,
past Duke's leaning
 clapboard newsstand,
 past the gnats
frenzied
 over the strawberries
 in front of Cho's grocery.
Her brother's blood
 was scrubbed away
 weeks ago,
but not before
 it had dried
 and stained
the pocked cement
 the brownish-purple
 of a rotting plum.
The air still tastes
 of aluminum
 and vinegar.

Daniel

Pacing the sideline, or just standing shoulder to shoulder
with my parents, he'd nod a single heavy nod
after a perfect steal or when, blocking a shot, I'd take the ball

heavy against my stomach or stinging thigh.
He missed only one game that year. I knocked hard on his door,
showed him the welt, the splattered badge

on my thigh, the price of a perfect slide-tackle.
Thick shoulders hunched against the weight
of my voice, he nodded heavily, a twitch

of smile tugging the light across the creases of his face.
He told me then about Korea, about lying in the snow
in his own crimson splatter. He showed me

the small imperfect circle of pink. It glowed
against the inky expanse of his shoulder. I asked him why
it puffed out. *My soul still leaks a little*, he said, and chuckled

at the wide whites of my eyes. *I bet you've never felt
snow falling into your soul?* I was almost brave.
I wanted so much to impress.

Ferris Wheel

The sun, its last hour above the horizon,
is like an old penny; the smog and dust the same
as 20 years of hungry fingers rubbing for luck.

Tonight, on a straight stretch
of highway from Los Baños
to Madera, a blue Honda Civic will swerve
for no apparent reason. The driver
will wake 37 days later
knowing only pain. He will not know
the simple series of movements
needed to walk or say hello. His name
is Paul, and he will believe the nurse
when she tells him this. He will learn,
in time, to say hello again, though mostly
he will say, *Fuck off*.
He will already remember *I'm sorry*, and
I loved her too, though he will never
say it, only write it, once, his new,
awkward letters leaning across the page.
He will remember hammer, trigger,
and cocked, though he will not name them.
He will know the taste of hardened steel
on his tongue for one brief moment.

But that is the future, and it will wait.
Now is a small-town Fair, an old Ferris Wheel

creaking in the dust, the horizon rising
and falling in rickety time, the touch
of a beautiful girl, and a lucky penny
rubbed smooth and bright.

Fog

Tendrils are the stuff of B-grade horror flicks.
It does not creep or crawl, it just... happens,
usually while you're inside
Wal-Mart, while you debate the virtues
of the six-pack double roll or
the twelve-pack single-ply, quilted or scented.

Mocking whoosh of door—*don't*
push me—dig for car keys, slow
slap of sack, a gluttoned snake, and wet silence
swallows breath, shuffle of feet, all trace
that you are here, that you exist. You cannot see
your car. You are surprised, again, by the thick
everywhere-ness.

The tumor, coiled hard
around your ovaries and intestine,
surprised us all. Within weeks, another
crawled into your long-empty
uterine cavity. A new vocabulary
infected our diction. Ovum. Colostomy.
Cavity. As in hole, a hollow. As in our eyes
that no longer met, or your bladder
as I rolled you to strip
another urine-soaked sheet. As in once full
and now empty. As in four damp walls
of dirt, edges roughly squared
by the inarticulate fingers of a backhoe.

*In the Scrub Grass Between the Back Lot of a Movie Theater
and the Clark Fork River, a Ring-Neck Pheasant Looks For
Food*

Three crows and a plump squirrel
eye it hard.

You, they say, do not belong, are not welcome.

Kaa, kaa, crows agree

and reconvene on the power line. Squirrel
claims a balding tire

and stares from the rusted wheel-well of an old Ford.

Bill, on his ten and sucking hard to finish

a second cigarette, points his finger, cocks his thumb.

Says *Shit*.

The Ring-Neck, done

with stale popcorn, flaps twice and mounts

the low branch of a half-naked aspen,

looks back once and flies off across the river.

After Blue

Ancient Spaniard in dirty blue rags, cradling his guitar
as if the perfect pitch of an F-sharp

is an old wound whose scar is still tender.
He plays that single chord, leaves it frozen and bent

in the air until it fades, until it is swallowed
and forgotten, just a twinge in the smallest

corner of his mind. He curls and curls
around his guitar, folds his body into the burl

of the wood, into the neck and the frets,
playing that one note, letting

it quiver and echo in his brittle, weakened
chest, letting it resonate until he breathes

F-sharp, until he is plucking the one thin string
of his soul. Until, at last, he begins to sing.

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